

DAVID RAMEY  
*Ramey Wine Cellars*

David Ramey is the owner, with his wife Carla, and winemaker of Ramey Wine Cellars in Healdsburg, California. Armed with a Bachelor of Arts in American Literature, David decided on a career in winemaking despite a complete lack of science training, and four and a half years later graduated from UC Davis with a Master of Science in enology. Following the harvest of 1979 with the Chateau Petrus team in Pomerol, and a vintage at Lindemans Karadoc winery in Australia, David joined Zelma Long for the redevelopment of Simi Winery in 1980. In 1984 he signed on with Matanzas Creek Winery as winemaker, and, after rejoining the Petrus team for the 1989 vintage, started as winemaker at Chalk Hill Winery in 1990. Six years later he accepted Christian Moueix's invitation to manage Dominus Estate in the Napa Valley, overseeing construction of their new winery building. In 1998, David left Dominus to help Leslie Rudd turn the Girard Winery into Rudd Estate, and in 2002 he began to focus exclusively on his own label.

Starting in 1996 with 260 cases of Chardonnay from the Hyde Vineyard, Ramey Wine Cellars now produces 15,000 cases among four different Chardonnays and three Napa Valley Cabernet blends. In February 2003 a winery in downtown Healdsburg was leased, providing at last a home to allow continued growth and increased quality.

## DAVID RAMEY

### *Balance and Style*

This is a simple continuation of my talk in Burgundy five years ago. In a way, I'm preaching to the choir because essentially, I believe, if there's one single take-home from *Focus* it's the importance of acidity. I don't think we have anybody here who would argue with that, but particularly for our French colleagues, I'd like to share with them some of the foibles and follies that we, as a young, wine-growing country, are undergoing. So I will contrast two of my wines with two commercial wines that I bought at a store two days ago.

I'm struck by three comments that some of our French colleagues made in this vein. First let me talk about structure. Just as in the construction of a house, the framework, the wood, builds the house and dictates whether you have a big house or a small house. Structure similarly relates to the flavor of a wine in that it dictates whether you have a big flavor or a small flavor. What we're talking about today is gross chemistry, not the secondary nuances, the esters and the various flavors that would go along with terroir differences. That, in the analogy I'm using, would be the paint on the walls on the inside of the house, or the kind of windows, the decoration, rather than the size and shape of the house.

So we're looking at gross chemical compounds. Water is the biggest one. Let's say there's 85% water, that's the sea in which we swim in wine. Beyond that, alcohol is clearly the next largest component. So that's the biggest factor in setting up the structure of your wine. This is obvious if you think of a 10% alcohol wine versus a 16% alcohol wine. Balancing that is acidity. I haven't mentioned sugar here because we're essentially working with dry wines, although at lunch yesterday we all agreed that sometimes we might have two or three grams of sugar left in our wine. That has the same effect as alcohol. Alcohol has the same effect as sugar; at least I'm proposing that for the purpose of this discussion. So alcohol and sugar are present and they push the wine to a fat, round structure. The acidity counterbalances that and pushes the wine to a lean, green structure.

Tannin is an interesting sub-player here because if a Chardonnay has more tannin due to what we call contact, or what the French would call *macération pelliculaire*, it gives an impression of body, an impression of mouthfeel and bigness in the palate, a texture. Whereas, as we move toward more delicately structured wine with low tannin, think champagne, you have a leaner mouthfeel.

So my contention is that tannin builds with alcohol and sugar to make a big, fat round wine, acidity makes for a lean wine, and absence of tannin, absence of alcohol makes for a lean wine. As I was thinking about these brief remarks, the first comment that resonated was Jacques Puisais' when he described Aubert de Villaine's 2000 Montrachet as round and the 1996 Montrachet as more linear and more direct.

I was also struck by Jean-Jacques Vincent's comment that he didn't pay so much attention to the acidity levels of wine, but to the balance between the alcohol and the acidity. As the one went up, the other needed to go up also.

Yesterday at lunch Bernard Morey made a comment lamenting the fact that he could no longer go over and dine in an Alsatian restaurant and drink a dry wine. That too, is an example of a style of wine that is headed

in this direction. We have the fourth wine now, which is warm. That's wine D. So it does correspond to your sheet.

The alcohols are all fairly high in them. Although I'm told that in a ripe year, Burgundy can actually achieve 15% alcohol naturally. It may be just a myth or a rumor, but I've heard that. And you know, we in California are blessed with good weather most years, so this is our issue. If, in Burgundy, you work from this end toward the middle by chaptalizing and paying attention to your farming, you have to really be good farmers in your more marginal climate and watch your yield and have healthy vineyards in order to get the maturity that you need; we work backwards this way because we achieve effortlessly, the fatness that I think you Burgundians seek. Our challenge is to then balance that easily-gained fatness of texture and structure with the vibrancy and freshness of acidity.

<b>WINES FOR DAVID RAMEY'S PRESENTATION</b>				
<b>FOCUS ON CHARDONNAY</b>				
<b>JULY 31, 2003</b>				
<u>Alcohol</u>	<u>TA</u>	<u>pH</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>280</u>
<b>A. Williams-Seylem 2000</b> Russian River Valley	14.4	5.47	3.39	10.2
<b>B. Ramey 2000 Hudson Vineyard</b> Napa Valley-Carneros	14.9	6.4	3.33	13.6
<b>C. Martinelli 2001 Woolsey Road</b> Russian River Valley	15.2	5.4	3.7	12.6
<b>D. Ramey 2001 Hyde Vineyard</b> Napa Valley-Carneros	15.1	6.9	3.2	11.1

A brief comment on the way I see tannin. When I started making wine with Zelma in 1980 at Simi Winery, we—and most people in California, there may be two exceptions in this room—were doing overnight skin contact for almost all white wines in those days. Gradually, through experimentation, we in California have moved away from skin contact and toward whole-cluster pressing.

I was struck by a conversation I had a few years ago with the team from Louis Latour, and when I asked them if they had any interest in whole-cluster pressing, or I think what the French would call *macération pelliculaire*. They said, *Pas d'intérêt*. No interest.

It seems to me that the common way of handling grapes in Burgundy is to crush and then, traditionally, to pump onto the pressed stems. My thesis in this regard is that the Burgundians may be a little more interested in some tannin or let's say, less interested than we are in minimizing tannin because a little tannin, in fact, can add a little body to some of the wines. Whereas for us, I think this is an explanation of why California has, over the last 15 years, so steadily headed toward as gentle a handling of the grape mass as possible. With our alcohol, we have a natural tendency toward this sort of structure. It's very important for us to try to maximize the delicacy and finesse of the wine by paying attention to acidity levels and to low tannin levels.

A word then, on what we can do about acid. Bob mentioned that he will sometimes add acid, and Bruno intervened to support that wholeheartedly. Now in California, as it was five years ago, there is still an interest in making big, fat, broad wines, because they appeal to certain critics and sometimes to a less-informed populace—somebody mentioned the Coca-Cola Culture. To the extent that this is true, many people did start drinking wine with white Zinfandel, acidity can be a problem for the normal American consumer.

Of my two wines on the table, the Hyde Vineyard, which is the warmer, last wine that they just brought out, requires no acidification whatsoever. It's a remarkable vineyard. Aubert and I were chatting, because he makes wine from it too, and he's struck by the same thing. He said to me that, truly, a great advantage of this vineyard is its prominent natural acidity. Now, 2001 was quite a ripe year.

BLACKBURN: Aubert de Villaine makes wine from Hyde?

RAMEY: Yes, in partnership with the Hyde family. It's called HDV. So if you look at the specs of Hyde Vineyard, we have, by nature of the season, the vintage, 15.1% alcohol, but also a 3.2 pH and almost 0.7 grams per liter of tartaric acid. I beg the indulgence of our French colleagues; we haven't converted them, simply 2/3 of the American numbers. The Hudson, which also has some positive elements, has an acidification of maybe one gram per liter, 0.7 grams per liter of sulfur.

That's why I chose these other wines to show you, particularly the Martinelli. There's a tendency, these days in California, to try to make every site a great site and to eschew intervention where intervention may make a better wine. That's the thesis of my talk, really. Personally, I think it's better to acknowledge the deficiencies of a particular site and rectify, if necessary, than to allow oneself to fall prey to the hubris that this site is great, and I don't have to do anything other than just ferment this to make good wine.

Classically, although we in California have advanced by utilizing the traditional artisan techniques of France, I also happen to know that you French, and even the Bordelais, can be very interventionist when needed to make a wine actually taste good. Thus the final note is, what does this have to do with our theme of *Tradition, Originality and Pleasure*? I think it has to do with the pleasure side. Once again, I do think that there's some classical value in having a balanced wine that's more pleasurable, on the one hand. Certainly, we all know what a meager, thin, acidic wine tastes like. That's why kir was invented. That is how you have dealt with that.

LEVINE: The champagne producers didn't put bubbles in their wine to make it undrinkable.

RAMEY: Yes, exactly. Okay. Yes, I should include this.

CARILLON: The week is going to get more and more challenging if you start us out on this note.

HAAS: David, I think it's also worth noting that A and C look like they were not filtered. They're cloudy.

RAMEY: I confess I sought those out, once again, just to share with our colleagues the sort of road that some people are following these days. I'm certain that all these wines are unfiltered. The two of them I know, because I bottled them unfiltered even though they're clear. And the others are obviously unfiltered.

HAAS: But they could have been racked a little cleaner.

RAMEY: They could have been. This is another example of what I think of as an interim folly of our progression, as a wine-producing culture, toward making wine that actually tastes good. That's a side point, really. The main point is taste. The tannin is the most difficult to make sense of there, and I think it's because they were analyzed at different times on different machines in different stages of the wine.

When I taste the other two wines, I get this really broad, almost soapy characteristic, almost Alsatian Pinot gris-like. To me, that's just at odds with my concept of Chardonnay and what I think of as the world's standard for Chardonnay. So that's really my point, just the sharing of what I think is still an important crossroads in the development of California Chardonnay style. Are there any observations or questions? I think otherwise we should take a break.

TANCER: You and Jim Laube, you're obviously out of calibration.

RAMEY: I'm not going to name any specific critics' names.

D'ALFONSO: David, for me the pH is the paramount reason why the Hyde is as good as it is, structured the way it is.

RAMEY: Given its high alcohol, yes, you would think so.

D'ALFONSO: The pH affects the strength of the acidity, high pH, low strength, even though you have high acidity. So it should be in there somewhere that pH is actually, for me, far more important than acidity, especially when you're pushing the envelope on wines like this.

RAMEY: Frankly, I consider pH and TA, for the purposes of this discussion, to be interrelated. But clearly, high pH gives a big, round, a broad mouthfeel and low pH, à la Champagne, which gives a skinny, mean mouthfeel. In fact, I was surprised when I first heard Roger Bolton say this at a technical seminar, but the more I thought about it, I think it's true. He said that you don't taste the pH as sourness. You taste acidity as sourness. I think that's probably true. Yet pH affects the mouthfeel of the wine, the broad versus thin in this sense. But I've lumped it in with acidity.

D'ALFONSO: It also exacerbates your tannins. It makes your tannins more tannic or less tannic. So I think it's crucial. That's just my opinion.

RAMEY: Okay. Yes.

D'ALFONSO: The pH is a crucial ingredient; the crucial ingredient, I think. And it is in all biological systems, I mean, the efficacy of drugs or of movement of ions in your body high pH, low pH, is vital.

JERAMAZ: Is there any malic acid left in wine D?

RAMEY: No. Both of my wines are finished malolactic.

JERAMAZ: How did you succeed?

RAMEY: It's the vineyard. It's the vineyard.

D'ALFONSO: Are these inoculated?

RAMEY: No, these are both feral fermentations.

(Laughter)

D'ALFONSO: I like that term.

RAMEY: Uninoculated is probably the best.

D'ALFONSO: Then the malolactic is also uninoculated?

RAMEY: Malolactic is also uninoculated, yes. I like to have that take place the following spring rather than before Christmas in terms of integration of the oak.

D'ALFONSO: I think that the responsibility that you show here versus the other two wines shows in the clarity, I know that isn't what you're trying to show, but it's obvious and I can't avoid it. I think winemakers have a responsibility to do this to their craft, unless there's a direction, an instruction on the back of this bottle that says, *Shake before pouring*.

RAMEY: That was the instruction I actually gave staff.

(Laughter)

HAAS: No, no, we were told by, I forget who, Marcassin people that what you do with their white wines is you get them in your cellar, and then you rest them for six months before you drink them, and then you stand them up for two weeks and then you drink them.

RAMEY: That's another approach, but it didn't serve my purpose here today. I did buy another wine, it was the cloudiest and the brownest, and I deemed it would not even serve my point, it was so far beyond. I paid \$50 for it. It is still on the shelf at the Wine Shop in Healdsburg, a 2000 vintage from a name producer by a famous winemaker. So we are fighting this through, at this point, without any particular help from our critics.

TANCER: What was your clarification regime on those wines?

RAMEY: My wines were both fined once. I have been known to do it twice, if necessary; these did not need it. It would have been fined with, from memory, about 45 milligrams per liter or 4½ grams per hectoliter casein, 15 milligrams per liter isinglass, and half a milligram per thousand or 60 ppm Bentonite, which is not a protein stability factor, but is a great clarification aid instead of half a pound per thousand or 60 ppm.

TANCER: I was really amazed at wine B. It's so clear and brilliant.

HAAS: Okay, David, thank you very much.

ADAMS: Can I ask one question, Bob?

HAAS: Sure.

ADAMS: Same barrel treatment, David, in both?

RAMEY: The single-vineyard wines get about 65% new oak, and they spend about 20-21 months in barrel. I make a *villages* level that is about 33% new oak and spends a year in barrel—eleven months.

However, I must say I think I'm about ready to start pulling back a little bit. I think rather than 65, 67, this year we'll be at about 60%. I may move toward 50%.

Again, Forrest asked how a young, new producer styles the wine. It is a combination of what you like and what you think is going to be appreciated by the marketplace. I mean, the American market and critics don't seem to be afraid of prominent oak. But personally, I think I'm going to be moving back a little bit.

HAAS: I found a more obvious oak in B than I did in the Hyde.

RAMEY: Okay.

HAAS: I think maybe I see a move in Burgundy, also, away from all new wood. I hope maybe we'll drag the critics with us in our direction and get them tasting more wine and less wood.

RAMEY: It's a conundrum. I mean, this issue of making wine for yourself, for your customers, for the critics, because they are all interrelated; they have to work.

HAAS: Okay, David, thanks very much.